Politics, Ideology and Class Struggle under Early Industrial Capitalism: a critique of John Foster

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A considerable tradition of Marxist scholarship has been devoted to the formation and early struggles of social classes during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, historically the first country to experience industrial capitalism. John Foster's study, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution, is a notable recent addition to this literature, and the welcome appearance of a paperback edition is perhaps an appropriate occasion to reconsider some of the wider implications of his work. This article is not so much a 'review' of the book—the time for that is past, and other reviewers have indeed said much of what I would want to say—as an attempt to discuss some of the broader questions it raises, both about the Marxist approach to historical analysis and about the interpretation of the period. Since the main tenor of my comments will be critical it is worth emphasising at the outset one merit of Foster's work: in attempting to construct a theoretical account of the processes he examines, and thereby opening himself to critical scrutiny Foster marks an important advance on more conventional modes of historical discourse, in which unstated and impenetrable assumptions fill the space properly occupied by theoretical concepts.

Foster's thesis is that the emergence of industrial capitalism was punctuated by a deep crisis during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, in which the 'suicidal economics' of the cotton industry and the growth of a 'revolutionary consciousness' (by which Foster means a political perspective of the sudden and probably violent overthrow of the state) among the working class shook the new factory system to its as yet historically shallow foundations. This challenge forced a profound historical re-orientation on the British ruling class—a shift to overseas investment, diversification of the industrial base with the development of heavy engineering etc., fragmentation of the labour-force, ruling-class strategies to encourage 'sub-grouping' within the working class, and the development of new more viable forms of 'social control' over a working class that had experienced industrial and urban concentration. This process of stabilisation, or 'liberalisation' as Foster calls it, brought about a remarkably sudden shift in working-class consciousness, from revolutionary challenge to capitalism to various kinds of sectional and subordinate struggle.

Readers familiar with the historical literature will recognise some elements of this argument. The emphasis on a stabilisation of industrial capitalism in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and the role in it of processes broadly similar to those Foster identifies is to be found, in somewhat different forms and emphases, in the work of various historians, Marxist and otherwise. Foster, however, rightly attempts to give precision to what can otherwise be a rather vague and idealist notion of a changing socio-political climate, and to locate this within a developed theory of the nature of working-class consciousness.

Foster's treatment of the economic developments of the period is in some respects questionable; Saville and Stedman Jones have argued that he over-estimates the weaknesses of the cotton industry, reduces the consequences of the factory to economic insecurity, overlooking the transformations of the labour-process that are at the centre...
of Marx’s analysis in Capital, and pre-dates the transition to imperialism in Lenin’s sense by confusing it with the rather different earlier process of overseas investment and world dominance in the production of capital goods. All of these debates are of great significance; a closer focus on the labour-process might, for instance, illuminate the role of sex and age divisions in the labour-force, one form of ‘sub-grouping’ that certainly existed in the period of Foster’s ‘mass revolutionary consciousness’ (it is not insignificant that the Chartist demand was for adult male suffrage). The present article, however, concentrates on Foster’s conception of the political and ideological levels, and the consequences of this conception for his analysis of the early working class. His theory of class consciousness is one of the most original, but least discussed aspects of the book.

The concept of class consciousness

A number of commentators on Foster’s work have criticised its tendency to schematic formalism and to a rather mechanistic view of ideology and politics. Thus, the actual nature of the labour movement of the 1830’s and 40’s is left rather ill-defined, and specific historical characteristics of Chartism are subsumed under general notions of ‘revolutionary consciousness’ and the ‘vanguard’, attributing to the movement a kind of precocious ‘Leninism’. I want to develop these arguments and to suggest that the features of schematism and mechanism in Foster’s text are related to the theoretical approach he adopts.

Foster attempts to construct a theory of class consciousness, and to distinguish it from sectional ‘false consciousness’ in the working class, by using a concept of ‘alienation’. ‘Alienation’ in Marx’s early writings refers to a social structure in which people’s productive activity escapes from their control, ‘a denial which “alienates” their full humanity as social beings’ (p. 4). There are two modes of response to this: a commitment to the overthrow of the system (‘class consciousness’), or the development of a sectional, sub-cultural ‘false consciousness’ (craft attitudes, racism, sexism, etc.) through which people build a kind of protective shell that enables them to come to terms with their social situation when the transformation of that situation no longer seems an immediate goal. This raises the question of the status in Marxist theory of ‘alienation’. It has been argued that, whatever its validity as a subjective description of the experience of social life in a class society, ‘alienation’ is not among the explanatory concepts of scientific socialism. This is probably not the place to rehearse that debate; what is of relevance here is that the concept seems of limited relevance in concrete historical research. Since ‘alienation’ is a global condition (embracing not only the working class but all sections of society, and not only capitalism but all class societies, and possibly socialist societies as well), it does not give us any kind of specific explanation of the development of social relations.

To explain ‘class consciousness’ and ‘false consciousness’ as responses to an alienative social system tells us nothing specifically about the variations in consciousness—thus it is not too helpful to approach the divergences within, say, Chartism in these terms—or about the reasons why one or other type of response should predominate. In Foster’s text the concern with consciousness is coupled with another mode of explanation, in which a rather simple economic determinism functions as the driving-force of ideological transformation. Unfolding economic contradictions disrupt sectional forms of consciousness, by forcing ‘the ruling class … to attack existing standards’ and thus creating the opportunity for ‘opponents of the system itself to intervene and win the leadership of organised labour (pp. 6, 19). This raises the question of where, within this structure of explanation, such ‘opponents’ could originate—where they actually originated historically is one of the interesting conclusions of Foster’s research (see pp. 30-32)—and, by implication, the highly contemporary issue of the role of revolutionaries in a situation of relatively stable class rule. Foster’s answer to these questions, implied rather than stated in his text, would appear to be that revolutionaries must somehow resist infection by the prevailing ideological climate, keep their powder dry, and prepare the ground to seize the opportunities presented by economic crisis.

The political and ideological level

A further set of issues about the relation between the economic, political and ideological levels of the social formation arise from the foregoing discussion. Foster apparently sees this relation as relatively straightforward, his account of it being organised around the ‘class consciousness/false consciousness’ dichotomy. ‘False consciousness’, although it has a material explanation (the economy determines the possibility of sectional gains), functions as a kind of blindfold preventing people from seeing a material reality that would...
otherwise be plain—that they live under a class society 'which denies part of its population equal control over social development' (p. 4). Revolutionary consciousness arises 'when capitalism itself reveals its full contradictions' (p. 124) and changes in the socio-political outlook of working class radicals (e.g. between the 'English jacobins' of the 1790s and Chartism) were 'moving in step with (and expressing) the system's own emerging contradictions' (p. 139). This posits a rather simple view of the relationship between the economic and ideological levels. It is doubtful whether capitalism ever 'reveals its full contradictions' (Marx after all spent some years trying to discover them), least of all at the relatively early stage of factory production in the first half of the nineteenth century. More specifically, the relationship between the inherited radical politics of the labour movement and the changes in economic structure associated with the transition to factory production poses complex problems of historical analysis; although there was a growing concern to theorise the experience of industrial exploitation there was no simple unilinear progression from radical democracy to early socialism.

Foster's view of the development of ideology as a relatively simple process is complemented by an instrumental, and in some ways elitist, view of political power—a view which suggests that politics and the state are passive instruments for imposing the will of a clear-sighted ruling class. Changes in consciousness involve the breakdown of systems of 'control' which had helped sustain the barriers of 'false consciousness' but then become fragile under the impact of economic change. The 'opponents of the system itself' are able to displace the 'go-betweens and message boys for the establishment' (p. 5). Subsequent initiatives to regain control ('liberalisation' in the late 1840s and 50s) constitute a 'collective ruling-class response', in which the bourgeoisie 'consciously used its industrial power' (pp. 3, 204). This perspective of 'control' is moreover extended to relations within the working class and its movements; 'opponents of the system itself gain 'mass leadership' and access to labour as a whole' leading to the 'subordination' of the movement to 'radical control' (pp. 99-100, 146). Similarly the relationship between the labour movement and sections of the petty bourgeoisie—a hitherto seriously neglected topic on which Foster's study breaks new ground—is seen in terms of a class alliance in which the working class imposes its domination over its allies (pp. 172-7). Shopkeeper radicalism is explained mainly by the factor of mass coercion of a shopkeeper electorate isolated in a working-class community; this certainly occurred, but we should not therefore overlook the significance of a democratic populist ideology shared by both petty-bourgeois and working-class radicals.

Social control

Foster therefore conceives of political rule, by whichever class, in terms of 'control'. The problem with this is that it fails to make historically crucial distinctions; the Peterloo massacre is 'control', so, we are told, is the religious adherence of sections of the working class, the populist beerhouse Toryism of other sections, and so on. 'Control' is moreover unilateral: one set of people controls, the rest are controlled, and various social institutions function as 'transmission belts' for this control. These difficulties of a simple notion of class rule as control are germane to the alternative conception of 'hegemony'. An analysis in terms of hegemony directs attention to the shifting equilibrium between repression and voluntary consent in the maintenance of political rule, the changing conditions of effective class dominance, and the contradictory relationship (not unilateral imposition) involved in this process. Hegemony is therefore a dialectical relationship, not a static system; it is never guaranteed but has always to be reproduced in political struggles at each new 'conjuncture', that is each shift in the balance of forces.' The breakdown of established forms of political rule, the consequent crisis of class relations, and the development of new forms in the period of stabilisation is certainly, as Foster suggests, a central theme of any history of early industrial capitalism in Britain. Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution provides valuable documentation of the way in which, in an expanding industrial town like Oldham, state power became extremely attenuated, and shows the significance of Whig and Peelite reforms (poor law, police, etc.) in attacking radical working class positions in local administration. This process became really effective only with economic stabilisation and the elaboration of new forms of rule viable in an urban industrial community; as Foster notes, acceptance of bourgeois domination took on an apparently more 'spontaneous' character in the 1850s (p. 220). Thus it would be unfair to suggest that Foster is not aware of the differences between forms of political rule; my point is rather that the framework he adopts does not sensitise us to those differences, or enable us to theorise the shift from one to another form.

The Industrial Revolution: a crisis of hegemony?

I want, then, to suggest that the concept of hegemony provides a more adequate framework for examining the development of political relations under capitalism than that adopted by Foster. The crisis, which Foster rightly locates in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, was above all a crisis of hegemony, of the political relations between classes and fractions of classes. The development of new forms was an uneven, protracted process with its own contradictions; it cannot be reduced to a single, dramatic moment of transition, or to the conspiratorial imposition of bourgeois schemes to bribe and indoctrinate the working class (there were such schemes, of course, but their capacity to command consensus within the bourgeoisie itself has to be carefully examined, and what actually happened, the forms of hegemonic rule that actually emerged, was anyway a different matter).

The growth of factory industry, the multiplication of handicraft employment in the non-factory sector (still in the mid-nineteenth century far larger than the factory sector), urbanisation, and the 'working class presence' brought about a serious disequilibrium in the political structures developed under the mercantile and agrarian capitalism of the preceding century. The early working class showed great combative power; equally important was the conflict between sections of the ruling class, often schematically described as being between landowners and the urban 'middle class' though in fact it was a good deal more complex than this, and the difficulty of constructing a viable system of alliances, especially given the increased social weight of urban communities.\(^8\) The capacity of the state to intervene, except inconsistently and repressively, was severely attenuated by these contradictions.\(^9\) The old ways of ruling were no longer workable, and different political parties and groups were struggling to elaborate new ones—a struggle reflected in the legislation of the 1830s and 40s.

Economic instability and the combative power of working class mobilisation at local level limited the success of these initiatives; it took a decade or more to implement the new poor law, introduce police forces etc., in the factory areas. Given this background of mass resistance, such institutions as the 'working class presence' were nothing like it anywhere else at the time; the phenomenon of a permanent radical mass organisation has much meaning at this period.\(^10\) What is significant, however, is the dynamic relationship between an inherited tradition of radical politics and a developing practice of class struggle. It is above all this dynamism that is lost in the subsequent fragmentation of the movement.

8 Thus the 1832 Reform Bill was the outcome of a brief conjuncture in which Wellington's Tory administration became isolated from 'agrarian' as well as 'urban' support.


11 It is also a serious over-simplification to see 'physical force' Chartism as 'revolutionary' and 'moral force' as 'reformist'.

The Containment of Working Class Opposition

How, then, was this challenge contained? Two features of the period seem to me relevant. First, the local nature of the struggle, and its relative incoherence at a national, or even regional, level: its great strength, derived from deep roots within local communities, was also in this sense a weakness. Second, the fact that the enormous economic power of the factory owners remained intact: when the mills ran it was under the direction of their owners, and workers were forced, especially under conditions of poverty-line subsistence, to work in them and to habituate themselves to the employer's authority. This habituation moreover involved a relationship between employment and family structures and a division of the working class in terms of sex and age at least as significant as the emergence of the 'labour aristocracy' in the 1850s. This process of habituation, changes in industrial structure (especially the growth of engineering), the possibility of sectional gains, the political defeat of Chartism, and the initiatives of competing bourgeois politicians to win working class support all contributed to the fragmentation of the movement.

Foster sees the emergence of a 'labour aristocracy' as a key link in this chain. His analysis is however weakened by a tendency to see the role of this stratum of the working class in purely 'collaborationist' and conspiratorial terms, and to see its distinctive institutions as modes of 'control'. In fact the upper strata of skilled labour were at the forefront of the industrial struggles of the third quarter of the century (Foster's identification of the labour aristocracy with forms of subcontract in industry, for example, obscures the fact that the Amalgamated Engineers, like most craft unions, strongly resisted the adoption of such practices) and also developed a strong sense of class identity within the urban community. Their position was imposed on the bourgeoisie in an antagonistic social relation, not just in industry, but also in community institutions where their demand for equal participation was a frequent source of friction. The stability of capitalist society rested on a measure of representation of the working class, especially but not exclusively of its upper strata, and a recognition of the autonomy of its institutions and culture. To understand the phenomenon of reformism it is crucial to realise that this representation was, and is real, not a smokescreen, and that it involved real class struggles, on however limited a basis. In these struggles the radical democratic outlook of the earlier period was still present and, through the political process, played a part in gaining the consent of the working class. The project of the bourgeois reformers of the 1830s, to eradicate the distinctive identity and organisation of the working class, had to be profoundly modified in any effective exercise of bourgeois hegemony.

How far the labour aristocracy can be extended as an explanatory concept is perhaps questionable. Its applicability to cotton seems doubtful; this key industry was characterised, not so much by the separation off of a minority of the male labour-force, as by the hegemony of the employers over their workers and the local community as a whole, in which the links between employment, family structure and sex and age divisions played a central part. The emergence of a labour aristocracy, i.e. of distinctive upper strata of skilled labour, is just one form of a far wider process of adaptation to the given environment of industrial capitalism. It has to be set firmly within the wider context of the development of forms of hegemony affecting all sections of the working class, and deeply transforming the practice and outlook of the ruling class itself.